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TAGS: [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PM](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: Confrontation with the FARC Rattles GOP

CLASSIFIED BY: Stephenson, AMB, State, FO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

#### Summary

11. (S//NF) Three members of the FARC were killed in Panama's Darien province and two were captured on January 27, apparently after a Panamanian National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) patrol stumbled upon the guerrillas traveling in a boat on the Tuira river. Reports indicate the guerrillas opened fire after being ordered to stop. One of those killed was mid-level commander Gaspar Gonzalez, alias "Rene" or "Orejas", reportedly close to 57th Front commander alias "Becerro." Some in the GOP appear to be rattled by the encounter. Minister of the Presidency Demetrio "Jimmy" Papadimitriou told the DCM January 28 that he did not have details on what had happened, and played down the request for helicopter support he had made the night before. Reinforcements are being sent into the area, apparently in fear of a possible retaliatory strike by the FARC. The GOP has strenuously denied reports in the Colombian press that the GOP bombed a camp. Mitchel Doens, Secretary General of the opposition Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) told reporters January 28 that he was afraid the incident was part of a "hidden agenda" involving a pact with the Government of Colombia that might compromise Panama's security. End Summary

Halt, who goes there!

12. (S//NF)) The incident took place on the Tuira River that runs through the Darien National Forest near the border with Colombia. The FARC 57th Front's Wilson Cordoba company, led by 57th Front Commander alias "Becerro" has long been based in this area. SENAFRONT has been carrying out a strategy for the last year, with Embassy support, to cut off FARC supply routes, restricting the amount of food that enters the area, and increasing patrols in choke points to make it more difficult for the FARC to operate. [Comment: It is the consensus view of Post Country Team that SENAFRONT does not have enough men, training, equipment or logistical capability to militarily confront the FARC, and that the "harassment" strategy is the most forward leaning strategy that

SENAFRONT can maintain. End Comment.] Reports indicate this was a routine patrol of approximately 30 men, who were following up on an intelligence report on a nearby FARC camp. Reportedly the patrol saw a boat on the river with six or seven armed persons on board, and ordered the vessel to stop. When the FARC members opened fire SENAFRONT returned fire, killing two and wounding three. One of the wounded eventually died. There are reports that one person escaped. The prisoners are being questioned by Panamanian authorities. The SENAFRONT personnel involved in the incident had received SOUTHCOM funded training by the Joint Planning and Assistance Team (JPAT), including marksmanship training.

13. (S//NF) Rene, a very active mid-level commander, was very close to Becerro, who played a key role in calming down members of the FARC that called for revenge after a similar incident last year in the Darien village of Manene. He has traditionally argued that the FARC should not confront Panamanian security forces, and has ordered the 57th Front to respect civilians and their property. It remains to be seen if the death of Rene leads him to take a different view of retaliation this time.

We were wondering . . .

14. (S//NF) The incident occurred at approximately 7:30 am. Over twelve hours later Minister of the Presidency Jimmy Papadimitriu called Post's ODC Chief to ask for helicopter lift support to bring reinforcements into the Darien. When DCM called the next day and asked for a readout on what had happened and exactly what kind of support the GOP was requesting, Papadimitriu said he had "no idea" what had happened, and minimized the previous day's request, saying he had, "just been wondering if you had some helicopters." DCM explained that all USG assets were tied up in Haiti, and pressed the need for the GOP to put some real effort into security planning. Papadimitriu said that it was time for the GOP to take security seriously, and realize that it was expensive and they would have to pay for it.

15. (S//NF) On February 1, SENAFRONT Deputy Director Christian Hayer told Emboff that SENAFRONT had 800 men in the area, and that they would begin pulling them back in one week. Embassy personnel traveled to SENAFRONT HQ in Meteti, Darien on January 28 and reported that SENAFRONT had cancelled all leaves, and the SEAL-trained RECOM unit was seen mustering for deployment, while buses of other SENAFRONT units headed east towards the border. However, there was no sign of a logistics mobilization that would allow the units to remain deployed for much more than a week. Newspaper reports are stressing the fear of a retaliatory strike by the FARC as the reason for the mobilization. The GOP has forbidden land or air travel over the border region until Saturday, January 30.

Colombian angle

16. (U) Shortly after the incident Colombian President Alvaro Uribe issued a statement from Davos, Switzerland thanking Panama and President Martinelli for the "military" operation that killed the three guerrillas. This was followed by a piece in the Colombian newspaper El Espectador that said Panama had "bombed" a FARC camp, citing Colombian Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva. Minister of Government and Justice Jose Raul Mulino made several public comments over the course of the day insisting that the encounter had been fortuitous, and denying that Panama had planned the operation ahead of time in any way with Colombia.

¶7. (U) PRDSecGen Mitchel Doens told reporters January 28 that the incident was part of a secret agreement between Panama and Colombia that could compromise Panama's security. He pointed to the contradictory statements by leaders of the two countries, and called them "suspicious," noting that Martinelli and Uribe had recently met. He also highlighted Silva's reported statement that Colombia would, "continue offering our cooperation . . . in the campaign against the FARC."

Comment

¶8. (S//NF) All indications so far are that this incident was a result of happenstance, and that SENAFRONT is not actively seeking to engage the FARC. There does not appear to have been any change in strategy or tactics with regard to the FARC by the GOP. The President and many ministers are not in the country right now, and senior government leaders seem to have been caught off guard by the crisis. The major mobilization of SENAFRONT forces does not appear to be well planned. While a FARC retaliation is possible, it would be a major change in the FARC's modus operandi in Panama, and

would entail serious strategic risks. Any attack would likely be against one of the many small isolated outposts throughout the Darien.

¶9. (S//NF) Post has been pushing the GOP since Martinelli took office to focus on security before the linked problems of the FARC, narco-trafficking, growing gangs, and a rising murder rate began to seriously damage Panama's reputation as a safe place to invest, and eventually its stability itself. The solution is not just money: it's organization and will to find competent leaders to begin to reform and build solid security institution in the country.  
STEPHENSON

=====CABLE ENDS=====